

COLLEGE & CAREERS

5 ways Gen Z is insisting on changes to the workplace

Recent graduates are leaning on employers to reshape work practices — and they might just succeed.

By Shruti Rajkumar Updated May 18, 2022, 10:50 a.m.



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The vast majority of this year’s college graduates belong to Generation Z, the group born between 1997 and the early 2010s. Growing up in a fully digital world, this cohort came of age during the pandemic and all that it upended. As they enter the workforce, they’re bringing their unique blend of skills — and some of their own requirements, too. Here are five priorities new grads are searching for in their future jobs.

1. Jobs that are flexible.

Once Carly Mast collects her bachelor’s degree in history from Boston University this

month, she'll head to New York University's Bronfman Center to work in social justice. One reason Mast accepted the offer was that it promised a firm boundary between the job and her personal life. She won't even have to keep traditional hours — during the hiring process, she was told the organization was not in the business of burning employees out.

“I want to be really intentional about my time and where I put it,” Mast says. With a freer schedule comes the responsibility for organizing it herself, but she was assured she'll have the support of her supervisors in doing it.

Most employees, no matter when they were born, are now asking for flexible work hours and locations, according to a 2022 Randstad Workmonitor [global survey of 35,000 workers](#). Gen Z workers appear particularly intent on achieving this (with millennials a close second): Over a third of Gen Zers surveyed reported that they've quit a job in or around the Great Resignation because it didn't offer enough flexibility.

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Meanwhile, a Deloitte survey last year found that 40 percent of Gen Z respondents thought that [flexibility and adaptability were the employee traits](#) they considered most critical to successful businesses — more important than attributes such as tech know-how and even subject matter expertise. If employers don't yet agree, they might soon need to get on board.

Rachel Lipson, director of [The Project on Workforce at Harvard University](#), sees an opportunity for employers to make workplaces better: “I actually would hope in this moment that we are able to take a pause and say, ‘Well, is the way that we were doing things always necessarily the right way, or the best way for people and what they want?’”

To Trinh Nguyen, director of the Office of Workforce Development for the City of Boston, hybrid models are a win-win for workers. Partial remote work “provides flexibility for innovation and efficiency,” she says, while in-person work allows employees to build on social skills, collaboration, partnership, and teamwork — skills, she adds, that are “essential to building a relationship with colleagues and supervisors for potential promotions and advancements.”



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2. Employers that match their values.

When Giselle Mota applied for a job as project analyst at the Boston law firm Mintz, she was drawn in by the language headlining the company’s mission statement: “Built on excellence, driven by change.”

“I think for a lot of places, they [bank] on history, and there’s no room for change or expansion,” says Mota, who’s finishing her degree in sociology and American studies at Wellesley College. “This is a firm with a lot of history, so for them to include [not only] ‘beyond excellence’ but [also] ‘driven by change’ was really important to me to show that there is space for input and space to express myself.”

That’s a common interest. Nearly half of Gen Z participants in a 2021 Deloitte survey said their [personal ethics have influenced their selection of employers](#). And a 2021 Ernst & Young Gen Z survey found that almost two-thirds considered it [crucial that their employers share](#) their principles, such as addressing racism and fighting climate change. “Employers need to demonstrate their values,” Ernst & Young concluded, “and position Gen Z staff to be impactful through their career.”

As Hana Ben-Shabat, founder of New York City-based research firm Gen Z Planet, puts it: “They have a preference to work for companies who have values and purpose beyond simply asking a shareholder, ‘Are we creating shareholder value or making more money and profit?’”



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3. Jobs where responsibilities frequently change.

A job with duties and expectations that are fixed from the start? Gen Z is calling that prospect unappealing. A massive 80 percent of this generation say they prefer a position that lets them [experiment and learn new skills](#), according to a 2022 ThoughtExchange survey. Meanwhile, research released by LinkedIn earlier this year found that in their job hunts, 76 percent of Gen Z job seekers wanted the [chance to grow and learn new skills](#). In contrast, only 55 percent of millennials surveyed rank that opportunity among their must-haves.

Mota accepted the project analyst role at Mintz in part because of these qualities. “I’m very big on experiential learning,” she says. “This program specifically allows you to rotate between three legal sectors in two years. So those are three different skill sets, three different sets of experts, that you get to be around.”

Positive signals can attract employees to a job, but negative signals can also turn them

away. Dennis Wieboldt, who finished his bachelor's degree in history this month at Boston College, decided to pursue a master's degree, in part to make himself a more distinguished applicant in what he's heard is a highly competitive job market. Comments from peers who'd already been in the workforce also tipped the balance. "[They] said it just wasn't really an environment where they felt like they were growing," he explains.

To satisfy the desire to work and learn at the same time, Lipson of Harvard says, some US companies have adopted apprenticeship models, proven effective in other countries, that let employees work and earn college credit at the same time. Deloitte is advising its business clients that employees of the future [will need diverse skills](#) — such as coding, effective communication, and creative problem-solving — so jobs should be set up to expose workers to multiple departments and duties.

4. Diverse colleagues and execs at inclusive workplaces.

Gen Z is the [most racially and ethnically diverse generation](#) in American history, reports Pew Research Center. And for many young people entering the job market, those demographic facts translate to wanting to work at places that prioritize diversity and inclusion in their hiring and retention.

Ben-Shabat has seen it play out. "Because they are diverse, they value diversity," she says. "They're asking why these issues [of race and gender inequality have] persisted for so long, and they want to see change."

Katherine Sabido, who graduates this month with a degree in journalism and political science from Boston University, says that before applying for a job, she looks for a company's diversity and inclusion statement, and then researches if its corporate actions uphold its ideals. "If you're not going to fully carry out what you say in your diversity and inclusion statement, there's no point in putting it [in]."

A push for conversations around racial equity by some Gen Z workers, in some instances, has resulted in friction between younger employees and older workplace leaders, Lipson says. “I’m actually pretty hopeful that Gen Z will be able to shift us in a positive direction,” she says, “but we may experience some growing pains in getting there, when you think about the generational contrast of who’s in the working world right now.”

5. Drama-free work spaces and no toxic bosses.

Prior to accepting her job, Mast had interviewed with another college, but could tell it wouldn’t be a work environment she would enjoy. “The guy that was interviewing me cut me off, and I was like, “That doesn’t feel great, and gives me the vibe that you would not be a person I’d want to work with,” she says.

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[having supportive leaders](#) at the top, followed by harmonious work relationships. (“Extra pay for going the extra mile” was way down on the list.) They value mutual respect, gratitude, and recognition between co-workers and bosses. Mentorship is also important, with 82 percent of Gen Z reporting that [they want their supervisors to help them set performance goals](#), according to a 2021 survey by the Springtide Research Institute.

Ben-Shabat points out that mentorship can go both ways: “Gen Z is bringing a lot of things to the table — their knowledge of youth culture, their digital skills — so I think they can help someone with these questions or skills,” she says, “while getting from them the knowledge of the organization and how to navigate their careers.”

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